

RAND Research Brief

Interagency and International Careers for Military Officers Feasible and Advisable?

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Preserving or strengthening regional stability has become a major goal of U.S. security policy. This task requires a complex blend of economic, diplomatic, and military activities. To enhance the nation's capabilities for such activities, the National Defense Panel recommended establishing a cadre of military officers who are specialists in the interagency or international arena, and Congress asked the Department of Defense to study the feasibility and advisability of establishing a career model for identifying, training, and managing such a cadre. The National Defense Research Institute (NDRI) carried out the study and reports the results in *Interagency and International Assignments and Officer Career Management*, by Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, and Robert M. Emmerichs. The NDRI researchers conclude that it would be feasible to adapt existing career models for officers assigned to interagency and international positions. However, the advisability of such an action depends largely on the objectives to be accomplished and the importance accorded them.

SEVERAL CAREER MODELS ARE FEASIBLE

The feasibility of a career model for officers assigned to interagency and international positions hinges, first, on the number of positions available. Too few positions would not provide sufficient career opportunities to sustain these areas as a viable career option. The NDRI research team determined that there are about 330 policy-level positions. Most of these positions are located either outside the Department of Defense but within the U.S. government, e.g., State Department; or inside the Department of Defense but outside the military services, e.g., Office of the Secretary of Defense or the Joint Staff. Typically, senior officers fill such positions: sometimes majors or lieutenant commanders but mostly lieutenant colonels and commanders or colonels and Navy captains.

Broadening the focus to include positions at the operational level, which includes many more billets within the military services, raises the number of positions to 1500.

A second determinant of feasibility is whether a career model for officers assigned to interagency or international positions would mesh with the current officer management system. If such officers had to be managed very differently than the remainder of the officer corps, it would probably not be a feasible career track. All the military services manage most of their officers on the basis of a generalist career model, which is largely shaped by the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act and its predecessors. This model is designed to produce officers capable of winning the nation's wars. It is, up to a point, relatively flexible because it also provides officers with capabilities to answer other needs. However, in response to other demands, several variations on the generalist model have developed. NDRI researchers identified four. For example, one variation concentrates on developing a specific competency, e.g., acquisition management.

Using a detailed simulation model and other assessments, researchers determined that officers assigned to interagency or international billets could be managed within any one of the four variations. That is, all four career models could fill the positions with officers having the requisite education and experience. And the officers could expect a series of assignments and education opportunities that would give them jobs of increasing responsibility and promotions comparable with those of their peers. So, both from a numerical and from a management perspective, several career models for managing officers assigned to interagency and international billets are feasible.

ADVISABILITY DEPENDS ON OBJECTIVES AND PERSPECTIVES

The feasibility analysis assesses whether specific career models could be used to manage officers in interagency or international assignments. The advisability analysis centered on whether these models should be pursued. The latter question is considerably more complex because it depends on the interaction of different perspectives and different objectives.

NDRI researchers identified three perspectives: that of the individual officer, that of the using organization, and that of the officer's military service. Each of these is interested in achieving different objectives. For example, the individual officer favors career models that provide an opportunity to make a contribution, a reasonable assurance that a given career field will allow a full career, and some promise of reward—in terms of promotion, pay, or treatment, e.g., attractive assignments. The using organization prefers models that can help it accomplish its purpose and exercise some control over the nature and availability of the officers assigned to it. The military services are concerned with how well officers contribute to their own missions, how effectively the career model enables them to manage officers, and the costs of providing officers to outside organizations.

These objectives can clash. For example, a using organization might want a top-flight officer to help it accomplish its mission, but a service might be reluctant to assign an officer to a position that does not contribute directly to that service's mission. And an officer might want assignments that are considered important for promotion, but the using organization might not have many—or, indeed, any—such assignments.

The ultimate question of advisability reduces itself to one of determining whose perspective and objectives are regarded as most important. The NDRI researchers found that each of the career models could be preferred from one or more perspectives. For example, if each perspective is weighted equally, a model that ensures the availability of highly qualified leaders or one that develops and sustains expertise in areas important to the organization is preferred. However, if the officer's preferences are weighted lightly and those of the service and using organization equally, no clear preference for a model emerges. Absent a decision about whose perspective should receive priority, remaining with status quo management practices seems most likely. The researchers conclude that a specific recommendation for a career model depends on a yet-to-be-achieved agreement about the relative importance of these positions: how they fit into the national security structure and how they relate to important national security outcomes.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done for the National Defense Research Institute; it is documented in Interagency and International Assignments and Officer Career Management, by Harry J. Thie, Margaret C. Harrell, and Robert M. Emmerichs, MR-1116-OSD, 1999, 183 pp., \$15.00, ISBN: 0-8330-2772-7, available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: toll free 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or Internet: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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